

MY FRIEND AFTER ALL!<sup>1</sup>  
John 14: 23-29  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
May 9, 2010

A pastor was meeting with people who had joined the church over the last year. They were going around the room, each of them sharing reasons why they had joined the church. One man said, "I grew up in a very strict religious environment. Basically, what that meant was that I spent 35 years of my life thinking that God was mad at me. My conversion, if you could call it that, was when I figured out that God, who I thought was my enemy, turned out to be my friend."<sup>2</sup>

I

Many of us are cultural inheritors of a particular kind of image of God that comes from an extreme form of theological Calvinism. It is best seen in a statement from Jonathan Edwards in his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God," preached not far from here (Enfield, CN) in 1741. Here is the way he described God's attitude toward sinners:

*They are now the objects of that very same anger and wrath of God, that is expressed in the torments of hell. And the reason why they do not go down to hell at each moment, is not because God... is not then very angry with them... Yea, God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now*

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<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, May 9, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon, "You Don't Need to be a Disciple by Yourself," *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 38, p. 30.

*on earth: yea, doubtless, with many that are now in this congregation, who it may be are at ease, than he is with many of those who are now in the flames of hell.*<sup>3</sup>

In another part of the same sermon he describes God this way:

*The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.*

Still later in the sermon, when the people were holding on to their pews in fear, he said:

*The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire....*

I find it hard to love a God like the one Edwards describes here. Instead of God creating the world and pronouncing it “good,” Edwards’ God creates the world and condemns half of it to hell before they are born, and there is nothing anyone can do about it! Such a conception of God was prevalent in this country for a long time, and it still shows up in some extreme elements of religious faith today. Whether Muslim, Jewish, or Christian fundamentalists, this approach to religion suggests more interest in talking about the anger of God than the love of

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. III, eds. Clyde E. Fant, Jr., and William M. Pinson, Jr. (Waco: Word Books, 1971), pp. 56ff.

God. It is marked by careful articulation of the condemnation of God rather than the love of God.

Combine this conception of God with the increasing politicizing of religion, and the recipe is set for the current culture wars in which both sides are careful to describe those whom God hates. If God truly hates, then it is only logical that the extreme version of that hatred is someone like Faisal Shahzad parking a car full of explosives in Times Square, or the so-called Christian militia in Michigan plotting to murder a policeman and scheming to set off a bomb at his funeral. Focus on the supposed hatred of God and that is the logical result!

No wonder we have a resurgent of militant atheism! No wonder we have a Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and Bill Maher. They are the natural reaction to such a conception of God.

## II

What a contrast to the words we hear today from Jesus, who seemed to have a completely different understanding of God. *Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.* Jesus never viewed God as a tyrant ready to send people to hell. He viewed God as a loving parent who was ready to stand up in behalf of us human beings.

For Jesus, God was not only a loving creator, but one who would not forget those who are created. Listen again to the words of Jesus: *But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.* The word translated *Advocate* is the Greek word *paraclete*, which means “one who stands along beside you.” The *paraclete* is the one who stands beside you when you are in trouble. The *paraclete* is the one who speaks on your behalf when you are condemned by others. The *paraclete* is the one who was walking beside the author of Psalm 23 when he felt like he was walking through the valley of the shadow of death. The *paraclete* is the shining one who stood outside an open tomb and said to Mary, *He is not here; he is risen!*

The *paraclete* is the one who walked beside Francis of Assisi when he turned his back on the wealth and wishes of his father and devoted his life to the gospel. The *paraclete* is the one who stood beside Martin Luther when the Pope accused him of heresy. The *paraclete* is the one who walked beside the founders of this church nearly 200 years ago and said, “Yes, you can build a church in Worcester.” The *paraclete* is the one who stood beside this congregation as it entered each new century with a commitment to meet the challenges of a new day. The *paraclete* is the one who stands beside us today as we prepare to enter

our third century. And the *paraclete* is the one who says to us today, "You have a bright future full of trust and commitment. You are just getting started!"

### III

So take a deep breath. God is not your enemy. God is your Advocate, your friend, one who walks beside you. That is precisely what Jesus was saying to those disciples who were so concerned that they would be left alone, abandoned by God.

There is a cartoon in which Calvin and Hobbes come marching into the room one day. Calvin's mother is seated in her favorite chair. She is amused and amazed at how Calvin is dressed. He is wearing a space helmet on his head, and a cape hangs down his back.

"What's up today," asks his mom.

"Nothing, so far," answers Calvin.

"So far?" she asks.

"Well, you never know," says Calvin. "Anything could happen today."

Then Calvin marches off, looking over his shoulder. "And if anything does," he says, "by golly I'm going to be ready for it."

Calvin's mom looks out at the reading audience and says, "I need a suit like that!"

Well, lots of moms need a suit like that. Dads too! We all do! But Christian faith does not offer a super-human suit or a protective helmet. Rather, our faith offers a friend, an advocate, a divine partner in life. And it offers one more thing: peace. *Peace I leave with you*, said Jesus. *My peace I give to you*. Then he qualified what he meant by peace. *Not as the world gives*, he said.

Do you see how he qualified it? The world gives peace through rule of law—a good thing, for sure, but still not the kind of peace he is talking about. The world gives peace through force or threat of force. Law and order is form of peace, but it is not the peace Jesus is talking about here.

God's peace comes not by force, but by free choice. The world's peace is through strength; God's peace is through divine friendship that remains true and faithful through all the hard times as well as good. That is the underlying theological meaning behind the old gospel song: *What a friend we have in Jesus*.

#### IV

When Jesus befriended all kinds of people he was living out the theological reality that God is not our enemy. He was teaching by his own life that God is not angry with you. God is not out to get you. God is out to befriend you.

Once that reality becomes imbedded in your life, then the rest of the words of Jesus make sense: *...let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid*.